

# The Role of Ideophones: Phonological and Morphological Characteristics in Literature

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**Abstract**—Many Asian languages, such as Korean and Japanese, are well-known for their wide use of sound symbolic words or ideophones. This is a very particular characteristic which enriches its lexicon hugely. Ideophones are a class of sound symbolic words that utilize sound symbolism to express aspects, states, emotions, or conditions that can be experienced through the senses, such as shape, color, smell, action or movement. Ideophones have very particular characteristics in terms of sound symbolism and morphology, which distinguish them from other words. The phonological characteristics of ideophones are vowel ablaut or vowel gradation and consonant mutation. In the case of Korean, there are light vowels and dark vowels. Depending on the type of vowel that is used, the meaning will slightly change. Consonant mutation, also known as consonant ablaut, contributes to the level of intensity, emphasis, and volume of an expression. In addition to these phonological characteristics, there is one main morphological singularity, which is reduplication and it carries the meaning of continuity, repetition, intensity, emphasis, and plurality. All these characteristics play an important role in both linguistics and literature as they enhance the meaning of what is trying to be expressed with incredible semantic detail, expressiveness, and rhythm. The following study will analyze the ideophones used in a single paragraph of a Korean novel, which add incredible yet subtle detail to the meaning of the words, and advance the expressiveness and rhythm of the text. The results from analyzing one paragraph from a novel, after presenting the phonological and morphological characteristics of Korean ideophones, will evidence the important role that ideophones play in literature.

**Keywords**—Ideophones, mimetic words, phonomimes, phenomimes, psychomimes, sound symbolism.

## I. INTRODUCTION

**I**DEOPHONES are a vivid representation of an idea and sensation in sound. It is a word, often onomatopoeic, which describes a predicate, qualificative or adverb in respect to manner, color, sound, smell, action, state or intensity.

Ideophones are also considered as marked words that depict sensory imagery [1]. When defining these words, keywords such as: depict, describe, represent, sensory imagery, expressivity or mimesis are crucial. For example, the ideophone *mallang-mallang* (말랑말랑) in Korean describes the sensation a person receives when touching something which is very soft and tender. This word produces the same sensation in the listener as the representative Fig. 1. In this way, ideophones help listeners to perceive sensations and ideas that could only be felt through other senses: sight, smell, taste or touch.

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Fig. 1 Visual explanation of the word *mallang-mallang*

## II. CATEGORIES

Ideophones in both Korean and Japanese are divided into three categories: phonomimes, phenomimes and psychomimes.

### A. Phonomimes

These words are commonly known as onomatopoeia, which is expressed as *giseigo* in Japanese and *uiseongeoo* in Korean. Phonomimes mimic sounds, such as the sound of heavy rain or a dog's bark.

### B. Phenomimes

Phenonimes, known as *gitaigo* in Japanese or *eitaeeo* in Korean, are words that describe conditions, movements, states or forms. Therefore, they express ideas or impressions from senses that are not related to the sense of hearing: sight, smell, taste or touch.

### C. Psychomimes

Psychomimes, known as *gijōgo* in Japanese, depict psychological states, feelings or emotions. There is not a specific term in Korean for this category, although it is as rich in psychomimes as Japanese [2], [7].

## III. PHONOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS

The Korean language has a well-defined system of vowel harmony in which vowels are traditionally grouped into three categories: light, dark and neutral vowels [3], [4].

TABLE I  
KOREAN VOWELS [9]

Light vowels	ㅏ (a), ㅑ (ya), ㅓ (o), ㅕ (wa), ㅛ (yo), ㅞ (ae), ㅟ (yae), ㅜ (oe), ㅠ (wae)
Dark vowels	ㅓ (eo), ㅕ (yeo), ㅜ (u), ㅠ (wo), ㅠ (yu), ㅡ (eu), ㅚ (e), ㅜ (ye), ㅜ (wi), ㅜ (we), ㅡ (ui)
Neutral	ㅣ (i)

Light vowels express brightness, lightness, sharpness, thinness, and smallness, while dark vowels give opposite

feelings, such as darkness, heaviness, dullness, thickness, quickness or bigness. [5]

According to vowel harmony, dark vowels can never be used together with light vowels, and vice versa.

#### A. Vowel Ablaut

Vowel ablaut, also known as vowel gradation, is one of the most common characteristics of ideophones in terms of sound symbolism. It consists of a systematic variation of vowels in order to slightly change the meaning of that word. For example, the ideophone *banjjak* (반짝), which is formed by light vowels, suggests something small and light that shines; while the ideophone *beonjjeok* (번쩍), where the light vowels have been changed into dark ones, depicts something big and heavy that shines.



Fig. 2 Visual explanation of the difference between *banjjak* (반짝) (a) and *beonjjeok* (번쩍) (b)

An additional example that proves the difference of meaning when using light vowels versus dark vowels is the ideophone *morak-morak* (모락모락) -formed by light vowels and *mureok-mureok* (무럭무럭) -composed of dark vowels. While the first one illustrates the way a small amount of smoke rises up quickly in the air, the second one describes the way a large amount of smoke rises up continuously, as is the case of smoke produced and emitted by big factories. Furthermore, the ideophone *tong-tong* (통통), which is composed by light vowels, describes a person who is plump or chubby in a positive way. However, on the contrary, the ideophone *tung-tung* (퉁퉁), which contains dark vowels, points out a person who is overweight, and contains a negative connotation that adds criticism and cruelty. In this way, due to its semantic detail, vowel ablaut can cause slight changes to the meaning of what is expressed.



Fig. 3 Visual explanation of the difference between *morak-morak* (모락모락) (a) and *mureok-mureok* (무럭무럭) (b)

#### B. Consonant Mutation

Consonant mutation, also known as consonant ablaut,

changes gradually the meaning in terms of intensity. Korean has a three-step shift from the lenis or simple consonant, to its fortis, or reinforced form, and to its aspirated form. We can distinguish these into simple, intensive, and paraintensive; with the subjective impression conveyed by such forms being progressively more emphatic. [4]

TABLE II  
 KOREAN CONSONANT MUTATION [9]

	ㄱ	ㄷ	ㅂ	ㅅ	ㅈ
Simple	(g)	(d)	(b)	(s)	(j)
Intensive	ㄲ	ㄸ	ㅃ	ㅆ	ㅉ
	(kk)	(tt)	(pp)	(ss)	(jj)
Paraintensive	ㅋ	ㅌ	ㅍ	-	ㅊ
	(k)	(t)	(p)		(ch)

An example is the ideophone *kkam-kkam* (깜깜), which is formed by the intensive consonant *kk* (ㄲ), and manifests a state of darkness. However, *kam-kam* (깜깜), which is composed by the paraintensive consonant *k* (ㅋ), depicts a state that is even darker than *kkam-kkam* (깜깜). Consequently, the ideophone *kkam-kkam* (깜깜) may be used in a context where it is dark, yet not excessively dark. For example, where *kkam-kkam* (깜깜) can be used to denote the luminosity of the sky from 7 pm to 11 pm, *kam-kam* (깜깜) is used to express the maximum degree of darkness, such as the darkness of a tunnel, or the intense blackness of a countryside from 11 pm until the sun rises. Moreover, the ideophone *dan-dan* (단단) refers to something hard and solid, while *ttan-ttan* (똥똥) emphasizes its hardness and solidity more. Ultimately, *tan-tan* (탄탄) would express the highest level of intensity. This change in meaning is due to the different connotation that the simple consonant *d* (ㄷ) has with respect to the intensive consonant *tt* (ㄸ), and the paraintensive consonant *t* (ㅌ). Therefore, when referring to the solidity of ice, the form *dan-dan* (단단) may be used since it has the most neutral meaning. On the other hand, when emphasizing the hardness of the muscles after exercising, *ttan-ttan* (똥똥) may be used. Finally, *tan-tan* (탄탄) would be used to express the highest degree of hardness and robustness, just as when it is said that someone's body is as robust and strong as steel. The same happens when talking about the levels of overweight in a person. The ideophone *tung-tung* (퉁퉁), which is formed by the intensive consonant *tt* (ㄸ), refers to a person who is fat or overweight. However, the ideophone *tung-tung* (퉁퉁), which is composed by the paraintensive consonant *t* (ㅌ), emphasizes the maximum level of intensity. In the case of this example, not only the consonant mutation adds detail to what is expressed, but also the use of the dark vowel *u* (ㅜ) contributes on the negativity of its meaning. In this way, consonant mutation generates different levels of intensity, emphasis and volume of an expression. As it was presented in some examples, consonant mutation can be accompanied by vowel ablaut,

providing more specific semantic detail and expressiveness.

#### IV. MORPHOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS

Reduplication is the most important characteristic of ideophones in terms of morphology. Ideophones can be classified according to their form into simple form and reduplicated form. Full reduplication is the most common form, although partial reduplication also exists.

Reduplication carries the meaning of continuity, repetition, intensity, emphasis, and plurality. [6] For example, the ideophone *ttuk* (툭), which has several meanings, describes the way something, singular and not plural, falls down suddenly. The reduplicated form of *ttuk* (툭), *ttuk-ttuk* (툭툭) emphasizes the way something, plural, falls down rapidly and with more intensity than *ttuk* (툭). In this case, reduplication suggests singularity and plurality, and emphasizes its semantic intensity.

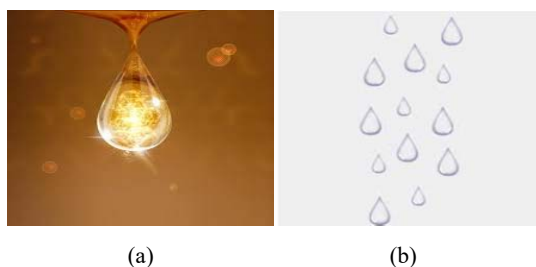


Fig. 4 Visual explanation of the difference between *ttuk* (툭) (a) and *ttuk-ttuk* (툭툭) (b)

Something similar happens with the ideophone *banjjak* (반짝), which refers to something small and light that shines. *Banjjak* (반짝) in its simple form would suggest something singular, such as one single star that shines while on the other hand, *banjjak-banjjak* (반짝반짝), illustrates small and light stars that shine, implying a meaning of plurality.

In the case of *beonjjeok* (변쩍), its simple form would evoke singularity, while its reduplicated form, *beonjjeok-beonjjeok* (변쩍변쩍), would imply a meaning of plurality. Besides this, the reduplicated form also emphasizes the intensity and continuity with which it shines. In this way, reduplication plays an important role, carrying the meaning of continuity, repetition, intensity, emphasis, and plurality. Vowel ablaut, consonant mutation, and reduplication can be combined together in one single ideophone, adding incredible semantic detail. For example, when referring to the ideophone *nalssin* (날씬), *nalssin-nalssin* (날씬날씬), *neulssin* (늘씬), and *neulssin-neulssin* (늘씬늘씬), all of them have different connotations. *Nalssin* (날씬), formed by light vowels and in simple form, refers to a person who is thin or slim. *Nalssin-nalssin* (날씬날씬) emphasizes its skinniness due to reduplication. On the other hand, *neulssin* (늘씬), which is composed by dark vowels, illustrates a person who is, not only slim, but also tall. The reduplicated form *neulssin-neulssin* (늘씬늘씬) intensifies and emphasizes its meaning.

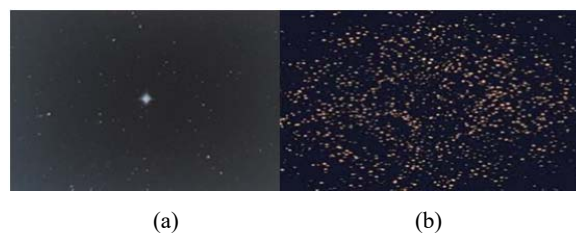


Fig. 5 Visual explanation of the difference between *banjjak* (반짝) (a) and *banjjak-banjjak* (반짝반짝) (b)



Fig. 6 Visual explanation of the difference between *nalssin* (날씬) (a) and *neulssin* (늘씬) (b)

#### V. IDEOPHONES IN LITERATURE

Contrary to Western languages, where ideophones are poorly used, in Asian languages, such as Korean or Japanese, ideophones are widely used in any register of the language: formal, informal, oral or written.

The following excerpt, taken from the famous Korean novel *Please Look up after Mum* by *Kyung-Sook Shin*, uses five ideophones in just one paragraph. This evidences the extensive use of ideophones in literature. After presenting it in English, each ideophone will be analyzed in order to understand the way it enhances and interacts with the text.

“Since you heard about mom’s disappearance, you haven’t been able to focus on a single thought, besieged by long-forgotten memories unexpectedly popping up. And the regret that always trailed each memory... You bend your legs and squat on the spot where mom might have done the same. A few days after you insisted on buying the plain dress, you arrived at this very station with mom. Holding your hand tightly, she strode through the sea of people in a way that would intimidate even the authoritative building looking on from above, and headed across the square to wait for Hyong-chol under the clock tower. How could someone like that be missing? As the headlights of the subway train enter the station, people rush forward, glancing at you sitting on the ground, perhaps irritated that you’re in the way.” [8]

“엄마가 곁에 있을 땐 까마득히 잊고 있던 일들이 아무데서나 불쑥불쑥 튀어나오는 통에 너는 엄마 소식을 들은 뒤 지금까지 어떤 생각에도 일본 이상 집중할 수가 없었다. 기억 끝에 어김없이 찾아 드는 후회들. 너는 어쩌면 엄마가 쭈그리고 앉아 있을지도 모를 자리에 무릎을 접고 앉아보았다. 기어이 네가 원하는 민짜 원피스를 고른 며칠 뒤에 너는 이 서울역에 도착했다. 너를 서울에

데려다주러 온 엄마는 위압적으로 내려다 보는 빌딩도 무찌를 듯한 걸음걸이로, 오가는 인파 속에서도 너의 손을 꼭 잡고 광장을 걸어가 시계탑 밑에서 오빠를 기다렸다. 그 엄마가 길을 잃다니. 지하철이 들어오는 불빛이 보이자 사람들이 몰려들다가 앉아 있는 제가 거치적거리는지 힐끔거렸다.“

It is important to briefly understand the synopsis of the novel in order to recognize the function of the ideophones in this short text, as well as the way they interact with each other. This book talks about a tragic story: the unexpected disappearance of a mother. This old woman who travelled from her home in the Korean countryside to Seoul with her husband to celebrate their birthday with her now-grown children, got lost in the crowd of Seoul station when she tried to take the subway together with him. This happened during the rush hour, when the station was full of people. Her husband got into the subway, but when he looked behind him, he realized that she was not there. From this point, the family will mobilize to find their missing mother, and they blame each other, and themselves, as the long-forgotten memories start to pop up, all of them full of regret.

“Since you heard about mom’s disappearance, you haven’t been able to focus on a single thought, besieged by **long-forgotten** memories **unexpectedly** popping up. And the regret that always trailed each memory...”

Two ideophones appear very close to each other in the first sentence: *kkamadeuki* (까마득히) and *bulssuk-bulssuk* (불쑥불쑥). *Gamadeuki* (가마득히) refers to something far, distant and remote. However, in *kkamadeuki* (까마득히), the plain consonant *g* (ㄱ) has been replaced by the tense consonant *kk* (ㄱㄱ) in order to emphasize the remote distance of these memories in her mind. These long-forgotten memories of her mum are just as distant as the end of a long dark tunnel.

The ideophone *bulssuk-bulssuk* (불쑥불쑥) comes immediately after *kkamadeuki* (까마득히) in the sentence. It describes the way something pops out repeatedly, just as fire sparks from a campfire pop out over and over, in an unexpected way, unable to restrain them. This intensity is achieved by the repetition of the ideophone *bulssuk* (불쑥) into *bulssuk-bulssuk* (불쑥불쑥). Both *kkamadeuki* (까마득히) and *bulssuk-bulssuk* (불쑥불쑥) contain, in this way, incredible semantic detail and yet accurate expressiveness.

“Holding your hand **tightly**, she strode through the sea of people in a way that would intimidate even the authoritative building looking on from above, and headed across the square to wait for Hyong-chol under the clock tower.”

The ideophone *kkok* (꼭), which means tightly, has an important role in this paragraph. *Kkok* (꼭) is formed by a light vowel, so it has a positive meaning. A mother can hold her child’s hand tightly because he did something bad, or in order to protect him from some kind of danger. In this sentence, *kkok* provides this second meaning. Additionally, this ideophone has a strong connection with the whole story: her husband released her hand, so she got lost and disappeared in the sea of people.

“How could someone like that be missing? As the headlights of the subway train enter the station, people

rush forward, **glancing** at you sitting on the ground, perhaps irritated that **you’re in the way.**”

Two ideophones appear one more time next to each other. *Geochijeok* (거치적) means to stand in one’s way or block up someone’s way. *Hilgeum* (힐끔) refers to the action of glancing or taking a brief or hurried look. Nevertheless, in *hilkkeum* (힐끔) the plain consonant *g* (ㄱ) has been replaced by the tense consonant *kk* (ㄱㄱ), emphasizing the way and the intensity with which people glance at her. Both ideophones express a subjective sensation of an objective incident: she subjectively feels that she is blocking up other people’s way, and she subjectively thinks that people are glancing at her.

In this way, five ideophones appeared in just one paragraph, providing semantic detail and expressiveness. It is also interesting to realize how they interact with each other and with the whole text. However, it is difficult to realize the importance of ideophones just by reading the translated version. In order to accurately translate the meaning of an ideophone, it would be necessary to use at least two to three adjectives or adverbs. This would be impossible, however, as the text would lose its smoothness.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Ideophones play an important role in both, linguistics and literature, as they enhance the meaning of what is trying to be expressed with incredible detail, expressiveness and rhythm. Vowel ablaut, consonant ablaut or reduplication are the main factors used to achieve this result.

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